

Mass for Artistic Community  
St Andrew's Cathedral, November 27 2011

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today, the first Sunday of Advent 2011, is a historic day across the English speaking Catholic world. It is the day on which the new translation of the Roman Missal becomes mandatory, offering new and often richer translations of the texts of the Order of Mass in English.

One of the most obvious changes lies in that exchange of greeting between priest and people ... “the Lord be with you – And with your spirit.”

Let me start by reflecting a little on that simple but very profound exchange.

The message of Advent is, in a way, summed up in those words: “The Lord be With You”. The word “*Emmanuel*” which we sing in so many of our Advent hymns means literally “God is with us”.

And the narrative of the Annunciation which we will hear on the fourth Sunday of Advent contains within it that phrase of Gabriel to Mary – *Dominus tecum*, (the Lord is with you).

And so we should be careful not to skip over that short phrase “*Dominus vobiscum* – the Lord be with you”. It is full of profound meaning, and with the new translation, although we may stumble over it a few times, we are helped to pay attention by the slightly changed response “*et cum spiritu tuo* – and with your spirit.”

This also should suggest a profound meaning; the priest alludes to the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit by his very greeting, and we acknowledge the same in our response to him.

This is the same spirit which animates the lives of artists. It is the spirit which inspires originality and prompts the desire in their work for truth and perfection. It is the spirit which ultimately points to the divine; to God.

As we read on the carved marble of the font, and as we read on the front cover of the “Journey through Advent” booklet published today by our Pastoral Planning team: “John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”

In a sense the work of the genuine artist (be that work concerned with painting or sculpture, film or drama, music or prose, sculpture or dance) can act as herald of the truth, rather like John the Baptist, if such work is inspired by God’s Holy Spirit, by faith and love; it can assist humanity in the search for the search for the transcendent; or, in Christian parlance, the search for God.

The challenge of the artist then is to represent truth and beauty in a new and satisfying way. Unless that desire for truth and beauty are present, art can become simply escapism, self indulgence or even a weapon of shock.

The words of the Gospel remind us never to slip into such mistaken ways. The Master, we are told, “left his servants in charge, each with his own task; and he told the doorkeeper to stay awake. So stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming ...”

What might He think of the return owed him for the talents he has lent you?

When the artist does “stay awake” to the voice of the Lord in cultivating that desire for truth and beauty then he acts, in a sense, like John the Baptist drawing people to the truth, pointing to the splendour of truth, the “veritatis splendor” about which the Blessed John Paul II wrote so memorably.

Over the next few weeks we will receive cards depicting Christmas scenes, extending from the truly banal to reproductions of great works of art. I note with satisfaction that the latter will also be visible on every Christmas stamp produced by the post office for the festive season.

So this is a time in which we are reminded very much of the vocation of the Christian artist. Here in Glasgow that reminder will be further amplified next spring with the opening of a new exhibition at Kelvingrove Art Gallery.

It is entitled “Essence of beauty: 500 years of Italian Art” and brings together some paintings in the Glasgow collection which have never previously been seen together, including great masterpieces by artists such as Titian, Bellini and Botticelli. I have been asked to act as patron of the exhibition which I am happy to do, since in visiting these masterpieces of religious art, I am convinced members of the public can be drawn closer to God and to the eternal truths of faith.

I am grateful to the City Council for this and for choosing a religious work from the upcoming exhibition to be the official Christmas card this year.

All of these apparently incidental elements are important in creating a culture which acknowledges and values faith.

The words of St Paul in today’s second reading come to mind: “I thank him that you have been enriched in so many ways, especially in your teachers and preachers [and in the context of today’s celebration I might add “artists”]; the witness to Christ has indeed been strong among you so that you will not be without any of the gifts of the Spirit while you are waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In your own way, each of you should see your artistic apostolate as a kind of bridge between the human and the divine. May people see in your words, your films, your paintings or your performances, gifts which help reveal the truth about God and the truth about humanity.

May they move beyond the superficial to the essence, may beauty lead them to truth, and the origin and source of both, namely God himself.

Amen